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Independent Evaluation of the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE): 2006 Evaluation Report

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Executive Summary

Independent Evaluation of the California High School Exit Exam

In 1999, the California legislature established the requirement that students pass a graduation exam in English-language arts (ELA) and mathematics beginning with the Class of 2004. Some modifications to the requirement for the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE) were passed in 2002. (For more details on the bills establishing this test and the basis for continuing evaluations and reports, including this one, see Chapter 1 of this report.) In July 2003, after the completion of the 2002–03 school year CAHSEE testing, the State Board of Education (Board) voted to defer the CAHSEE requirement until 2006.

The legislation establishing the CAHSEE in 1999 also called for an independent evaluation of the impact of the CAHSEE requirement. HumRRO has been performing this evaluation since January 2000. This report describes evaluation activities and results from July 2005 through June 2006, the seventh year of the evaluation. Findings from this year's evaluation activities have implications for most aspects of the CAHSEE, from the development of the test itself to how it is used and its impact on specific groups of students. The 2005–06 evaluation activities and findings are summarized briefly here and reported in more detail in the main body of the report under the following chapters:

- Chapter 1: Overview
- Chapter 2: Results from the 2005–06 CAHSEE Administrations
- Chapter 3: A Closer Look at Specific Populations
- Chapter 4: The 2006 Longitudinal Survey of Principals and Teachers
- Chapter 5: Trends in Educational Achievement and Persistence During the CAHSEE Era
- Chapter 6: Key Findings and Recommendations

Analyses of Data from the 2005–06 CAHSEE Administrations

The CAHSEE was administered in September 2005, November 2005, February 2006, March 2006, and May 2006 to 11th and 12th graders who had not yet passed it. All 10th graders in the Class of 2008 were required to participate in the February, March, or May 2006 administration. Results from these administrations were merged with CAHSEE results from previous years. There was some imprecision in matching due to differences in how identifying information was coded. The resulting matched files provide good estimates, but not exact counts, of the cumulative number of students in each high school class who have met the CAHSEE requirements. HumRRO reported results for 12th graders who were facing a June 2006 graduation deadline for passing the CAHSEE after the Fall 2005 administrations and after each of the Winter (February) and Spring (March and May) 2006 administrations.

Detailed analyses of results for 12th graders and comparisons of 10th and 11th grade results to corresponding results in 2005 are reported in Chapter 2. HumRRO also

examined factors related to school-level passing rates and analyzed responses to the student questionnaire that accompanied each of the CAHSEE tests.

Most 12th graders who had not yet passed the CAHSEE continued to work to pass and many did, but nearly 40,000 students did not pass by the end of the 2005–06 school year.

HumRRO's estimates of the numbers of students in the Class of 2006 who did or did not pass the CAHSEE by June 2006 are shown in Table 2.12. Excluding those students in special education who were exempted from the CAHSEE requirement for 2006, about 75,000 students entered their senior year still having to meet the CAHSEE requirement. Just over 36,000 of them met the requirement by June 2006; just under 39,000 did not.

Responses to the student questionnaire indicate that students were, in fact, working hard to meet the requirement. Only 21 percent of 12th graders taking the CAHSEE reported that they did not have to work harder to meet the CAHSEE requirement after taking the ELA test and only 17 percent gave this response after taking the mathematics test (see Table 2.50). More than 40 percent said they were working harder in the courses they were taking and 20 percent said they were taking additional courses because of the CAHSEE requirement. About 15 percent said that they were getting help outside the classroom and 10 percent said they were repeating a course to learn the material better.

Results for 11th graders from the Class of 2007 and 10th graders from the Class of 2008 were the same as the corresponding results for the Class of 2006.

By the end of 11th grade, 78.7 percent of students in the Class of 2007 met the CAHSEE requirement, compared to 78.4 percent of students in the Class of 2006. (See Table 2.23) Cumulative passing rates for 11th graders in the various demographic groups were also nearly identical for 2006 and 2005. Approximately 90 percent of White and Asian 11th graders had met the requirement compared to 69 percent of Hispanic students and 64 percent of African American students (both rates were up one percentage point in 2006). The cumulative passing rate for economically disadvantaged 11th graders increased more than one point, from 66.3 percent to 67.7 percent, but the passing rate for students in special education programs dropped 2 percentage points, from 35.5 to 33.5. The latter results may have been related to ongoing confusion as to whether the exemption for special education students would be extended to the Class of 2007.

Overall, 65 percent of this year's 10th graders (Class of 2008) met the CAHSEE requirement, the same percentage as in 2005. As shown in Table 2.24, the passing rate increased slightly for Native American (from 60 to 61%) and Hispanic (from 51 to 52%) students, but dropped for English learners (from 31 to 27%).

Passing rates for students in demographic groups with low pass rates were lower in schools with a high proportion of similar students.

Over 40 percent of schools with relatively high densities of Hispanic (more than 60%) or African-American (more than 12%) students had passing rates under 50 percent for ELA Hispanic and African American students, while only 6 percent of schools with low densities of Hispanic students (< 20%) had passing rates under 50 percent for Hispanics and African-Americans. For mathematics, the difference between schools with high and low densities of minorities was even more dramatic. Over 48 percent of schools with high densities of Hispanics had Hispanic passing rates below 50 percent compared to only 7 percent of schools with low densities of Hispanics. Similarly, schools with high densities of economically disadvantaged students, English learners, and students with disabilities had lower passing rates for these targeted groups than schools with lower densities. (See Tables 2.32 and 2.33 for more details.)

Results for Specific Populations

HumRRO conducted additional analyses of results for English learners and students with disabilities. These two groups of students have had particular difficulty meeting the CAHSEE requirement. New information on English learners, including dates they first enrolled in U.S. schools and the date that some of these students were reclassified as fluent in English, information about each student's English language development program, and information on special accommodations for English learners were analyzed to learn more about this population of students.

The 2005 evaluation report also included analyses of results for students receiving special education services. Data from the California Special Education Management Information System (CASEMIS) on student characteristics and services received was merged with CAHSEE results and analyzed to learn more about this population of students. This process was repeated with updated information from CASEMIS being combined with 2005–06 CAHSEE results.

Many students are still classified as English learners after as many as 10 years of education in this country.

Approximately 79,000 tenth grade students had previously been English learners but were now reclassified as fluent in English. Students who had been reclassified passed both the ELA and mathematics tests at higher rates than students in general (78% passed both tests compared to 65% of all 10th grade students). Former English learners who were recently (in the past 3 years) reclassified as proficient in English had lower passing rates compared to students who had been reclassified as proficient for 4 or more years.

Approximately 90,000 10th grade students remained classified as English learners. Supplemental analyses of data on English learners revealed that many students have been classified as English learners for a long time, without reaching

proficiency in English. More than half of the 10th graders still classified as English learners have been registered in U.S. schools for 10 years or more. In comparison to more recent enrollees, English learners who have been in U.S. schools longer (more than 7 years) were more likely to be economically disadvantaged, more likely to be in special education programs, and more likely to be classified as having a specific learning disability. Recent enrollees had more difficulty with the ELA test than with the mathematics test.

The population of students receiving special education services is quite diverse.

Our analysis of 2006 CAHSEE results for students with disabilities again revealed a strong relationship between the types of special education services a student receives and success on the CAHSEE. More than one third of the students analyzed received non-intensive services such as in-class accommodations or a resource specialist and were able to spend more than 80 percent of their time in regular instruction (Tables 3.14 and 3.15). About half of the students who participated in regular instruction passed the CAHSEE while still in 10th grade. Students in this category who had not passed in the 10th grade showed significant gains when they retested in the 11th and 12th grades (Tables 3.18 and 3.19). It seems likely that with continued assistance these students will have a good chance of meeting the CAHSEE requirement. It is thus reasonable to ask that both the schools and these students themselves continue to work to meet the required standards.

About one quarter of the students receiving special education services required intensive assistance. These students participated in regular instruction less than 20 percent of the time and only about 10 percent of them passed the CAHSEE during the 10th grade. Those who retested in the 11th and 12th grades showed only small gains in CAHSEE scores compared to other students.

Curriculum and Instruction

In 2000, we identified a representative sample of about 100 California public high schools and asked them to participate in a survey that included responses from principals and from ELA and mathematics teachers. We have continued to survey this same sample of schools in the spring of each year, except for 2003 and 2005 when we conducted a larger study of instruction, with a few replacements as needed. Results from the 2006 survey, including both responses to some new questions and trend information for continuing questions, as reported in detail in Chapter 4, provide information of the impact of CAHSEE on curriculum and instruction. Responses to some of the student questionnaire items provide additional information on how their curriculum relates to the CAHSEE.

Most examinees reported that topics on the CAHSEE were covered in courses that they took.

Overall, only 7 percent of all 10th graders and 16 percent of 11th and 12th graders still trying to pass the CAHSEE ELA test said that many topics on that test were not covered in their courses (Table 2.48). Similarly about 9 percent of all 10th graders and 16 to 17 percent of 11th and 12th graders still trying to pass the mathematics test said that many of the topics on that test were not covered in their courses. For 12th graders who reported that topics were not covered, 29 percent had not taken Algebra I, a course required for graduation, and 23 percent more reported taking Algebra I in the 12th grade and so had not yet completed the course (Table 2.19).

Principals indicated that CAHSEE has had a positive influence on instruction and they are implementing new ways to identify students that need additional help.

The percentage of principals reporting having implemented plans to assist students who may have difficulty passing the CAHSEE increased sharply in several areas. In 2006, 46 percent of the principals reported having fully implemented plans to increase remedial courses and another 37 percent reported having partially implemented such plans (Table 4.15). The 83 percent who said they fully or partially implemented remedial courses compares to only 58 percent who responded this way in 2004 and only 43 percent in 2002. Similarly, the percentage of principals who reported fully or partially implementing plans to increase summer school offerings rose from 31 percent in 2004 to 67 percent in 2006 and the reported number implementing plans to provide tutoring rose from 40 percent in 2004 to 96 percent in 2006. The percentage of principals who reported that they have plans to ensure all high school students receive instruction in each of the content standards also increased from 53 percent in 2004 to 71 percent in 2006 (Table 416).

Teachers found the CAHSEE Teacher Guide to be useful, but many indicated they were unfamiliar with the California Department of Education (CDE) Web site.

Approximately 65 percent of the teachers responding to our survey (68% of the ELA teachers and 63% of the mathematics teachers) indicated that the CAHSEE Teacher Guide was very or somewhat useful (Table 3.9). About 20 percent said they were unfamiliar with the Teacher Guide and only 1 percent reported that the Teacher Guide was not at all useful. By contrast, only 45 percent of the ELA teachers and 52 percent of the mathematics teachers found the CDE Web site to be very or somewhat useful, whereas 41 percent of the ELA teachers and 31 percent of the mathematics teachers said that they were not familiar with the site.

Trends in Educational Achievement and Persistence During the CAHSEE Era

Observed trends in important student outcomes over the past several years may reflect, in part, the far-reaching effects of the CAHSEE requirement for standards-based education and accountability. Since outcome information was not yet available at the

time of this report for students in the Class of 2006 who were subject to the CAHSEE requirement, most of the results summarized in Chapter 5 provide baseline trend information that will be augmented as the CAHSEE requirement takes hold.

Dropout rates from 10th through 12th grade have declined in the years since the CAHSEE requirement was established.

The CAHSEE requirement was enacted in 1999. Enrollment declines from 10th to 11th grade dropped sharply beginning in 2002 with the Class of 2004 and continued to decline this year for the Class of 2007 (Table 5.3). Enrollment declines from 11th to 12th grade dropped even more dramatically beginning in 2002 with the Class of 2003 (from 10.6 to 8.1%) and have been below 8 percent for subsequent classes (Table 5.4). There was, however, a modest increase in the 12th grade enrollment decline this year for the Class of 2006 (from 7.2% back up to 7.8%). While small in comparison to the earlier decrease, it may be significant because the Class of 2006 is the first group required to pass the CAHSEE.

California also reports 4-year high school dropout rates. The method for computing these rates changed significantly in 2003, so it is difficult to make comparisons between current rates and rates prior to 2003. Both the 1-year and 4-year dropout rates reported by the U.S. Department of Education and the California Department of Education declined slightly in 2005, the most recent year for which data were available. Note, however, that recent research has shown these 4-year dropout rates may be unrealistically high because 9th grade enrollments are inflated by students who repeat 9th grade (Warren, 2005). An alternative figure is obtained by using prior-year 8th grade enrollment to estimate the number of *first-time* 9th graders in a given year and then using this as the base for calculating 4-year dropout rates. At the same time, dropout rates may be unrealistically low because of the exclusion of students entering GED programs and students whose school status is uncertain.

Participation in Advanced Placement programs and scores on college placement tests both increased in 2005.

The proportion of 11th and 12th graders taking Advanced Placement courses and scoring 3 or better on the Advanced Placement Tests has increased steadily from about 14 percent during the 1999–2000 school year to 21 percent in the 2004–2005 school year, the most recent year for which data are available.

Recommendations

As in past years, we offer several general recommendations based on observations and findings from our evaluation activities. These recommendations are targeted to the Board and the legislature as they consider additions or modifications to policies concerning the CAHSEE and its use. We also offer several more technical recommendations for the continued improvement of the CAHSEE. These latter recommendations are targeted to CDE and to the test developers.

Key Policy Recommendations

General Recommendation 1: CDE worked to publicize options for students who do not complete the CAHSEE requirement in time to graduate with their class. Now data are needed on how many students take advantage of the various programs and on the effectiveness of each program in helping students to learn essential skills and earn their diploma.

Little statewide information is available on the number of students who did not graduate in June 2006 solely because of the CAHSEE requirement, on how many of these students are still trying to meet the CAHSEE requirement, and on what they are doing to help them meet the requirement. A number of students from the Class of 2006 who did not pass by June did participate in the July CAHSEE administration. Most were shown as still being 12th graders in the same schools they had been in the year before. Some were identified as now being in an Adult Education program. To date, no information is available on students who might continue to pursue a diploma through a community college program or on how many may be attempting to obtain a GED rather than a regular diploma.

Information on how many students are still working to earn a high school diploma and on the programs they are using to do so is needed in order to make policy decisions about how best to encourage and support students in these pursuits and how to encourage other students to continue to try to earn the diploma rather than giving up on their education.

General Recommendation 2: In addition to continued efforts to help seniors who have not yet passed the CAHSEE, work is needed to improve programs for juniors who did not pass in the 10th grade and, even more importantly, to improve programs to prepare students to be ready to pass on their first try as 10th graders.

Given the intense attention necessarily paid to last year's 12th graders, who were in the first class to face the CAHSEE requirements, the absence of improvement in passing rates for 10th and 11th graders may not be surprising. The long-term solution to helping all students meet the CAHSEE requirement must involve preparing more of them to pass in the 10th grade and improving immediate remediation efforts for those students who do not do so. CDE might work with districts to set goals for increasing the passing rates of 10th and 11th graders and to identify strategies for meeting these goals.

For mathematics, results presented in Chapter 2 suggest that preparing students to take Algebra I in 8th or 9th grade, rather than deferring this requirement to later grades could improve 10th grade passing rates. The data also suggest that encouraging students to take one or more mathematics courses beyond Algebra I would further improve the likelihood that they would meet the mathematics requirement in the 10th grade.

Another approach that many schools are implementing is to improve systems to achieve earlier diagnosis of student deficiencies in skills tested by the CAHSEE. Providing students who need additional help with remedial services before taking the exam for the first time is an obvious way to improve initial passing rates. High schools might improve coordination with middle schools to use assessment and other diagnostic information collected by the middle schools to identify individual student needs as they enter high school. Coordination with and feedback to middle schools is needed to ensure that all students develop foundational skills and are prepared to benefit fully from the high school curriculum.

General Recommendation 3: Research is needed on why many students remain classified as English learners for long periods of time. CDE should gather lessons from districts and schools that have been more successful in helping students achieve proficiency in English and make this information available to those with lower rates of success.

Initial CAHSEE passing rates for English learners are closely linked to efforts to help these students achieve proficiency in English. Improvements to California's English language development (ELD) programs have allowed many students to attain proficiency within one or two years of entering the U.S. educational system. Many English learners, however, have not been able to reach English proficiency even after many years (e.g., 10 or more for 10th graders). While there has been research on the effectiveness of ELD programs, more research is needed to identify programs that are particularly effective for students with various barriers to English proficiency.

General Recommendation 4: Districts and the state should provide support and guidance to IEP teams in making key decisions about whether students in special education programs can meaningfully participate in the regular curriculum. Students who can participate in the regular high school curriculum should be held to the same high expectations as the rest of their classmates. At the same time, districts and the state should identify alternative goals and ways of recognizing the accomplishment of these goals for students who are not able to participate meaningfully in the regular curriculum.

As part of a settlement agreement in the Chapman case, legislation was passed exempting Class of 2006 students in special education programs from the requirement to meet the CAHSEE requirement. Additional legislation (SB 267) has just been enacted to extend this exemption to special education students in the Class of 2007. Analyses reported in Chapter 3 indicate that the population of students participating in special education programs is quite diverse. Extending a blanket exemption to all of them may not be the most effective approach to ensuring that all students reach their full potential. Instead, California may wish to consider exemptions and alternatives for special education students that are targeted to the curriculum they receive.

General Recommendation 5: Research is needed on factors that lead to lower CAHSEE passing rates in schools with higher concentrations of at-risk students. Programs in schools with high concentrations of at-risk students who are successful in passing the CAHSEE should be identified and information about these programs should be disseminated widely.

Differences in passing rates for minority and disadvantaged students in schools with high and low concentrations of similar students are striking. We cannot tell from the available data whether the different passing rates result from differences in program effectiveness or more simply from differences in the nature and needs of the students served. We do know, however, that the low passing rates in schools with high concentrations of at-risk students are not acceptable. More systematic study of differences between high-concentration schools with high passing rates versus those with low passing rates is needed to support the development, dissemination, and implementation of programs to increase success on the CAHSEE for schools serving high proportions of at-risk students.

General Recommendation 6: Data on success in college and other endeavors for students who pass the CAHSEE will be needed soon to determine whether the CAHSEE requirements are sufficiently rigorous.

When the CAHSEE content and passing standards were first established, the State Board of Education signaled its intention to increase the rigor of these standards over time, as the effectiveness of instruction increased. ACHIEVE and other groups reviewing high school graduation requirements have argued for considerably more rigorous requirements. For example, ACHIEVE argues that all students should be required to take not just Algebra I, but also Geometry and Algebra II, in order to be prepared for a challenging college curriculum. Other research has shown that students who come to college unprepared and thus begin by taking remedial, non-credit-bearing courses, have significantly lower chances of completing college.

Many students from the Class of 2006, the first cohort of students subject to the CAHSEE requirement, have now entered college. Collecting data on their success in getting into college and the proportion required to take remedial courses once they got there will provide important information for policy-makers who must decide whether and how much to increase the rigor of the CAHSEE requirement for future high school classes.

More Specific Technical Recommendations

Specific Recommendation 1: CDE and ETS should seek ways to improve scoring consistency for the CAHSEE essays during high volume administrations.

The rate of exact agreement between independent scorers of each student's essay has generally been near 70 percent and the frequency of disagreements by more than one score point has been below 0.5 percent. In both 2005 and 2006, exact agreement rates for the 10th grade essays in the high volume administrations (February and March) has been 66 or 67 percent and the frequency rate of disagreements by more than one score point has been above 0.5 percent. While variability in the essay scores is only a minor factor in the reliability of the overall scores, it would still be prudent to work to continue to improve scoring consistency. CDE may wish to set explicit targets for scoring consistency, such as 70 percent exact agreement and less than 0.5 percent serious disagreements, and then monitor ongoing progress in meeting these more rigorous targets.

Specific Recommendation 2: The CAHSEE Web site includes a wealth of useful information about the CAHSEE that teachers should find useful. CDE should consider ways to increase teacher familiarity with and use of the CAHSEE Web site.

Between 30 and 40 percent of the teachers responding to our survey said that they are not familiar with the CAHSEE Web site. CDE might consider ways of increasing information about the Web site. In addition, CDE might conduct focus groups to suggest ways to make the Web site even more useful to teachers.